

# Roman table-talk, Greek style

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The symposium (or drinking party) is a fine institution that flourished in Classical Greece. But its later history in the period of the Roman Empire tends to be ignored. Here Jason König looks at that later tradition and examines how parties became occasions for showing off intellectual prowess, and gave rise to a whole style of learned ‘symptotic’ literature.

The symposium, or drinking-party, was one of the most distinctive customs of classical Greece. In practice it must have varied enormously, at different times and places. That variety is all too often forgotten. However, our sources do suggest a number of common, recurring features. The Greek word – *symposion* – literally means ‘drinking together’. This was an elite, all-male institution: usually the only women present would have been prostitutes. It had established rules and elements of ritual: drinking usually followed a meal, and was preceded by libations (offerings of wine to the gods), and led by a ‘symposiarch’ (head of the symposium), chosen by the other guests, and responsible for supervising the mixture of wine with water and controlling the pace of drinking. It could be a venue for musical entertainment provided by musicians or dancers. Even more important, however, was the entertainment provided by the guests themselves, through singing and conversation. Symptotic talk and symptotic song were thought of as shared activities, which all the drinkers should contribute to. Among other things we hear about practices of competitive word-play and riddling, as well as witty quotation of earlier poetry.

How were those practices reflected within archaic and classical Greek literature? The literary symposium has a long history. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed before the customs outlined above became formalized, but Homer’s poetry nevertheless has many scenes of dining and drinking which have much in common with what we know of the later institution, and he was viewed by later authors as the ancestor of subsequent writing about the symposium. Aristophanes’ plays have a number of scenes – for example at the end of *Wasps* – which offer us tantalising glimpses of the symposium in action. Lyric poetry often described the pleasures of love and drinking. Many of these verses were clearly

composed for performance in symptotic contexts – so party entertainment which was itself, rather wittily, about partying. Sometimes the intellectual, literary element of the occasion was even more clearly at the fore. The most famous use of these traditions comes, finally, in the portrayal of Socrates and his friends in conversation in Plato’s *Symposium* and Xenophon’s *Symposium*, both written in the fourth century B.C. Both of these authors adapt the idea of the symposium as a place for erudite, playful speech, making it in addition a venue for philosophical talk.

## Greek parties and Roman imitation

The classical and archaic symposium is familiar to most classicists. However, the story of the later symposium – as both an institution and a literary genre – is less often told, though the tradition flourished in the Roman empire. Even if relatively few people still conducted their symposia in the same manner as the classical Athenians of half a millennium before, nevertheless literary images of traditional symposium activity were powerful vehicles for fantasizing about, or in some cases mocking, the idea of continuity between past and present, in a culture which was obsessed with the heritage of classical Greece. The following few examples give a taste of some of the ways in which the literary symposium tradition was extended in the first to third centuries A.D., and even beyond, within early Christian culture.

## Dinner-parties for the gourmet intellectual

Let us look first at a set of works which take the philosophical symposium genre

*Neptune and Amphitrite from a mosaic in an open-air triclinium (dining-room) at Herculaneum.*

in new directions. These are the ‘symptotic miscellanies’ of the Roman empire. In these works the idea of philosophical table-talk is used as the basis for compilations of vast collections of miscellaneous knowledge. For example, Plutarch’s *Sympotic Questions*, probably composed in the early decades of the second century A.D., is a collection of nearly 100 erudite dinner-party discussions on scientific and literary topics, and on the history of the Greek symposium itself. These traditions even have an afterlife in early Christian literature: Methodius’ *Symposium*, written in the late third century A.D., describes a banquet of ten virgins who take it in turns to speak in praise of virginity. It is in effect a collection of knowledge on a vast range of different theological topics.

## Something fishy about Athenaeus

Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophists*, written probably in the early third century, is perhaps the most peculiar of all these fascinating texts. Athenaeus’ text is ostensibly a record of an enormously long dinner-party discussion, involving a set of impossibly learned guests. The primary aim of their conversation is to accumulate obscure quotations from earlier writing on food. Take the following tiny sample, a set of extracts from the catalogue of fish in book 7:

*The gnapheus: Dorion, in his work On Fish, says that the liquid produced by boiling the gnapheus gets rid of any stain. Epaenetus also mentions it in his work The Art of Cookery.*

*The eel: Sea eels are mentioned by Epicharmus in his play The Muses; and Dorion, in his work On Fish, mentions those which come from Lake Copais, and speaks highly of them. They grow to an enormous size. Agatharchides, at any rate, in the sixth book of his European History, says that the Boeotians put garlands on the biggest of the Copaic eels, in the manner of sacrificial animals, say prayers over them, and sprinkle barleycorns over them and sacrifice them to the gods*

*Anchovies: These mentioned as being very small fishes by Aristotle*

*in his treatise On Living Creatures. Dorion, in his work On Fish, mentions the encrasicholi among fish that are best stewed. He says: 'Fish which must be boiled are the anchovies, iopes, smelts, gobies, little mullets, small cuttlefish, squid, and crabs'.*

Some of Athenaeus' references are hard for us to follow. It is not clear what kind of fish the *gnapheus* or the *iopes* are. Some of the authors Athenaeus mentions in the work are not known to us from any other source. But the extraordinary variety of texts he quotes from should be immediately clear even from that tiny quotation: comic poets (Epicharmus), works of cookery (Epainetus), treatises on natural science (Aristotle), and many other genres, most of them written many centuries before Athenaeus' own time. Compiling knowledge was a very prestigious way of writing in the ancient world, whereas today encyclopaedias tend to be seen as purely functional and unexciting. It is hard for a modern reader to recapture the appeal these texts would have had, although they have distant descendants in food books like the *Larousse Gastronomique* or the *Oxford Companion to Food*. For Athenaeus' readers, this extraordinary compilation was presumably viewed among other things as a celebration of the Greek tradition. It must have appealed above all to a sense of fantasy, allowing them to indulge in the idea that their own present day eating and drinking was part of a heritage with roots in the distant classical past.

### Subverting the symposium

Athenaeus' symposium was clearly very different from Plato's famous model. But many other texts go much further towards debunking ideal symposium behaviour. Even in the classical period disruptive behaviour was always a part of the literary symposium tradition: there are many examples of classical symposiasts pushing the boundaries of polite behaviour, seeing how far they can go, or else warning about the dangers of insulting or even violent misbehaviour at a drinking party. Even in Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates and his friends famously send the musicians away and announce their intention to drink only in moderation, Alcibiades disrupts the party by gate-crashing drunkenly towards the end of the work, turning the discussion in a more irreverent, disorderly direction.

This theme of subverting the symposium appears in various forms in the literature of the Roman period. The Greek and Latin novels are full of examples. In Petronius' *Satyricon*, for example, the banquet of the *nouveau riche* Trimalchio is presented as a hilarious but debased

version of the Platonic original. Once again, these themes even work their way into early Christian literature. Arguably the depiction of Jesus in the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Luke, dining with sinners and outraging the pharisees by deliberately transgressing their banquetting customs and purity laws, draws on this tradition of the disruptive symposium guest.

### Overthrowing the intellectual dinner-party: philosophers at the wedding brawl

Perhaps the most entertaining and funny example of all is Lucian's *Symposium*, written in the second century A.D. There, a group of philosophers at a wedding party turn out to fall very far short of the Platonic ideal, as the occasion degenerates into brawling. Traditionally, dinner-party conversation was competitive, but Lucian transforms the idea of rivalry between philosophers into literal fighting. And the motives for their brawling are unphilosophical. They fight, for example, over who is to have the biggest helping:

*Zenothemis ignored the bird in front of him and picked up the one in front of Hermon, which was, as I said before, fatter. Hermon, however, grabbed hold of it himself and refused to allow Zenothemis to be greedy. At this point there was a shout, and they fell on each other and hit each other in the face with the birds themselves, and grabbing hold of each other's beards they called out for help...*

The beard is ostensibly a symbol of philosophical seriousness, but here—on these fake intellectuals—it becomes just a handle for the brawlers to hold on to. The lamps are knocked over and they are plunged into darkness:

*When someone came at last with a lamp, Alcidas was caught stripping the flute girl and trying to have sex with her by force, while Dionysodorus too was found to have done something absurd, for a cup fell out of the folds of his cloak when he stood up.*

Dionysodorus' behaviour here is just one of several examples in the work where the philosophers are spotted trying to steal from their host. This kind of slapstick humour is relatively unusual in classical literature. Its function here is to disrupt the philosophical ideals of the Platonic symposium tradition. The philosophers turn out to be obsessed with bodily pleasures and material gain, and absurdly far removed from the philosophical ideals they claim to represent. In this work, like many others, Plato's *Symposium* lives on,

but in a comically re-imagined form, as part of Lucian's wider goal of indulging but also exposing as absurd his contemporaries' devotion to the literary culture of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

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